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ABSTRACT

To encourage children of migrant agricultural workers to remain in school and to persuade children who had never attended to begin, the Leflore County Schools in 1966 began a program of Visiting Teachers, funded under Title I, Elementary Secondary Education Act. At the close of the 1968 school year, a decision was reached to revamp the existing program into an Attendance Counseling Department. Working throughout the County as liaisons between school and the children's home, the Attendance Counselors attempt to work out problems which may be preventing children from attending school. Leflore County Schools presently employ eight full time counselors and one full time director. Each counselor is located in a particular school within the county and serves as part of the staff of that school. As a member of that staff, the counselor receives referrals of children who are exhibiting symptoms of social or emotional difficulties which are interfering with their learning, their attendance, or their social adjustment. If a child misses two consecutive days, an attendance counselor visits the home and discusses with the parent the child's problem. During the last five years Average Daily Attendance has risen nearly six percent over that of the 1965-66 school year. This represents an average of 360 children attending school each day who otherwise would have stayed home. (Author/JM)

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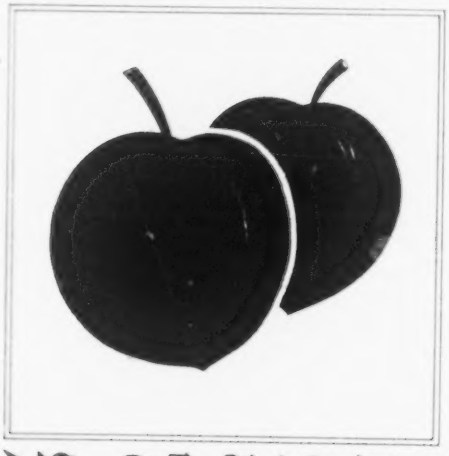

VISIONS OF SUGARPLUMS

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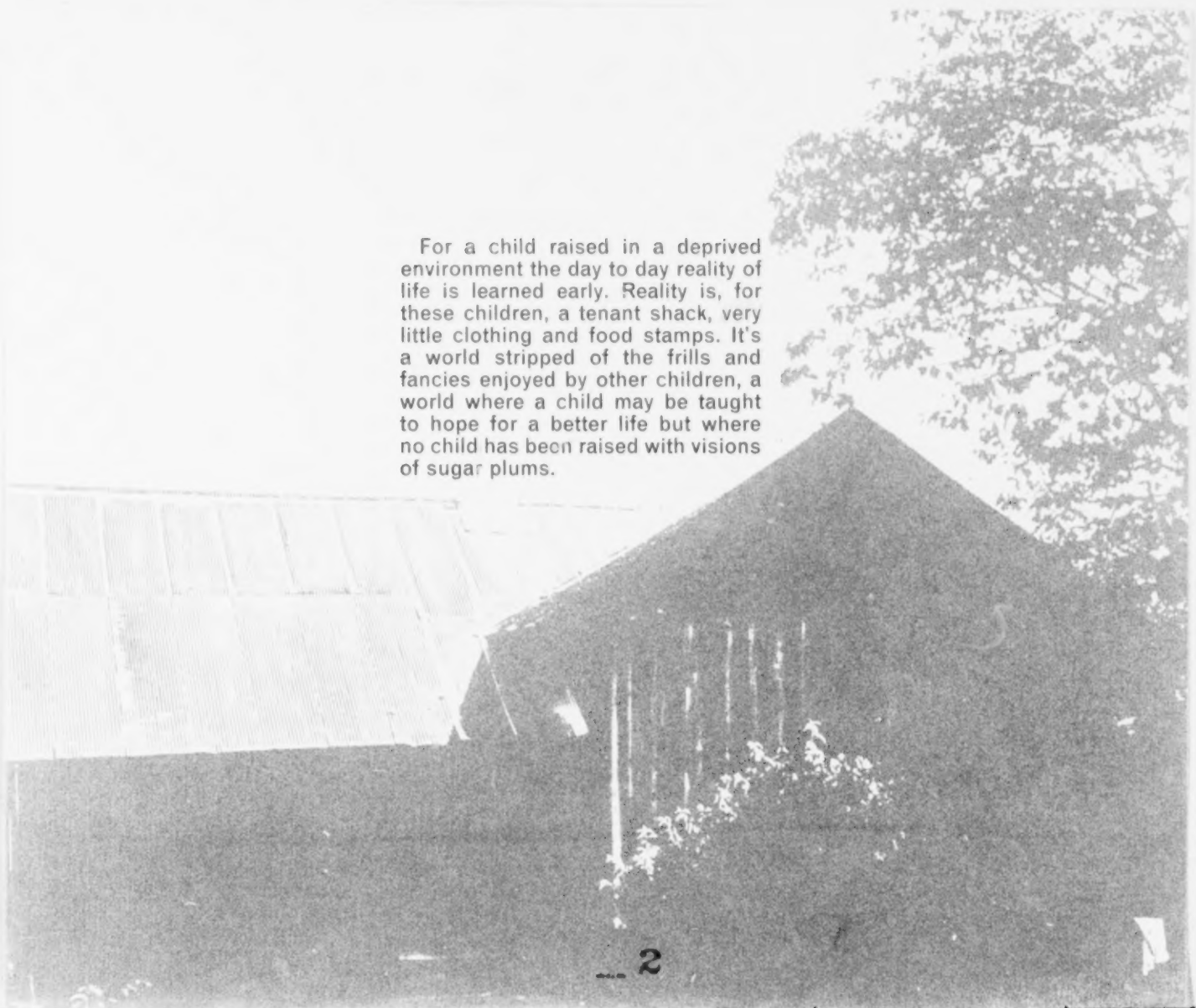

For a child raised in a deprived environment the day to day reality of life is learned early. Reality is, for these children, a tenant shack, very little clothing and food stamps. It's a world stripped of the frills and fancies enjoyed by other children, a world where a child may be taught to hope for a better life but where no child has been raised with visions of sugar plums.

Plantation schools like Double Oaks, Runnymeade, Caney Bayou, Green Grove, Swiftown, Race Track and one hundred and seventy-eight others, once scattered across Leflore County in the Mississippi Delta are fast slipping from memory. Until the sixties these schools, often no more than a one-room wooden shack built on land provided by the plantations, from which the schools derived their names, served to educate the children in the county.

For the children who attended these schools, sitting on wooden benches beside faulty heaters on winter mornings, school meant not education but a place to be kept when they weren't needed. The fields surrounding the schools dictated when they would be opened and when they would be closed. Normally they were open from the first of August to the last of September. Then schools throughout the county closed until the cotton was picked. Beginning again in December, the term ended in March. School was an 'in-between thing' — 'in-between' hoeing and 'in-between' picking. It served to contain rather than to educate.

What little education children received was soon forgotten in the fields, not surprisingly since the lessons had little relationship to their day to day reality. A teacher who remembers those days describes a typical reading lesson. "... a teacher in charge. When she would say, 'Chart class, rise and come to the benches, all who were of the same ability would come forward to the two recitation benches at the front of the room near her desk. There the students followed her rubber tipped pointer and read.

I see Ben and Will.
They saw the big log.
Can they use the axe?
A cat! A rat! Can the cat see the rat?

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A student was well on his way when he mastered, 'Charles and his father go to see the sun rise.' That was the end of the chart."

The schools offered little in the way of education. In many cases the only reason the children attended was because the plantation owner wished their parents to send them. When a child reached twelve or thirteen, however, education was discouraged. He was big enough to do a full days work in the fields and he had enough 'schoolin'.

For generations the Delta lay dormant, virtually untouched by the modernizing society surrounding it. Children were born and lived as their fathers and grandfathers had. In the fields at an early age, the children hoed and picked cotton, were paid by, housed by, and were dependent upon the plantation owner on whose land they lived. They grew up knowing what their future would be. They knew they would have a job, knew they would have a house, knew that they would produce offspring to live the same cycle. Good or bad, their future was secure. Suddenly, within a span of less than ten years, the Delta emerged into the twentieth century. In the new Delta, where a single mechanical cotton picker replaces 249 hand laborers and a capital outlay for equipment of 75,000 dollars is required for each worker on the plantation, jobs are extremely scarce. There exists an understandable hesitance to employ uneducated persons to operate expensive equipment. With the displacement of workers from the farms small plantation schools rapidly disappeared. But for the thousands of children brought up in the plantation system, who are now parents with children of their own, school is remembered as an agonizing ordeal with very little purpose or benefit.

With monies provided by ESEA Title I, Leflore County Schools in 1966 began a program of Visiting Teachers in an attempt to encourage children to remain in school and to persuade children who had never attended to begin. Working on a part-time basis, after regular teaching duties, the visiting teachers met with little success, but what they did succeed in doing was to reveal to administrators the dimensions of the problem.

At the close of the 1968 school year a decision was reached to revamp the existing program into an Attendance Counseling Department. A full time person with a degree in Social Work was employed who set about developing a comprehensive program of social services. This approach to school social work, although common in many parts of the country, was novel in Mississippi, being the first such program to be established. Guidelines used by School Social Work Departments in other parts of the country proved to be inadequate for Leflore County. It was felt that in order to provide the services which were required by the children in Leflore County a completely new approach must be taken.

To understand why this decision was reached it is necessary to understand the conditions under which this department functions. One of the major handicaps faced in establishing an Attendance Counseling Department was that Mississippi has no Compulsory School Attendance Law, so there is no way to force a child to attend school, nor to force a parent to send him. Also, the social and economic background of the people living in the Delta is unique. A survey taken in the late sixties indicated sixty-three percent of the families live in homes of four rooms or less with one to fifteen children.

Seventy percent of the children attending the schools come from families with incomes of less than 2,000 dollars. One-third of the heads-of-the-household are illiterate. Almost half of the homes have no toilets of any kind—neither inside the house or outside—and seventy-five percent of the homes have no inside plumbing. Twelve percent of the mothers had their first child at age fifteen, and an additional twenty-five percent had their first child within the next year. Obviously, children from such homes require many special services if they are to function in standard classroom situations. While plantation schools existed the problems were less noticeable. The children attended school because other children on the plantation attended. They went to school without shoes or with holes in their clothes and didn't feel out of place because other children were dressed as they were. At Racetrack School where 175 children attended, all came from either Glen-Burr or Racetrack Plantations, coming from the same background they blended together naturally.

The principal who once ran Racetrack remembers the living conditions of those children.

"Most of the children had no idea what a fork or spoon was; they ate mostly from tin cups. If they got a cut on their foot their parents would open it up and take soot from the chimney and smear it on the cut. Everybody wore a bag of asafetida around his neck to ward off disease. Some still do. None of these children were born in a hospital. Everybody used a mid-wife, and a lot of the children died."

When the plantation schools closed and the children were bused to consolidated schools and placed with children from more affluent homes, difficulties arose.

Although the primary function of the Attendance Counseling Department is to reduce absenteeism, it became apparent early in the project that in order to increase the Average Daily Attendance many more aspects of School Social Work would have to be employed. Both the social and economic conditions of the children play such a major role in their absenteeism that in order to insure consistent presence a unified effort between the Attendance Counseling Department and other departments within the school system and local and state agencies had to be established.

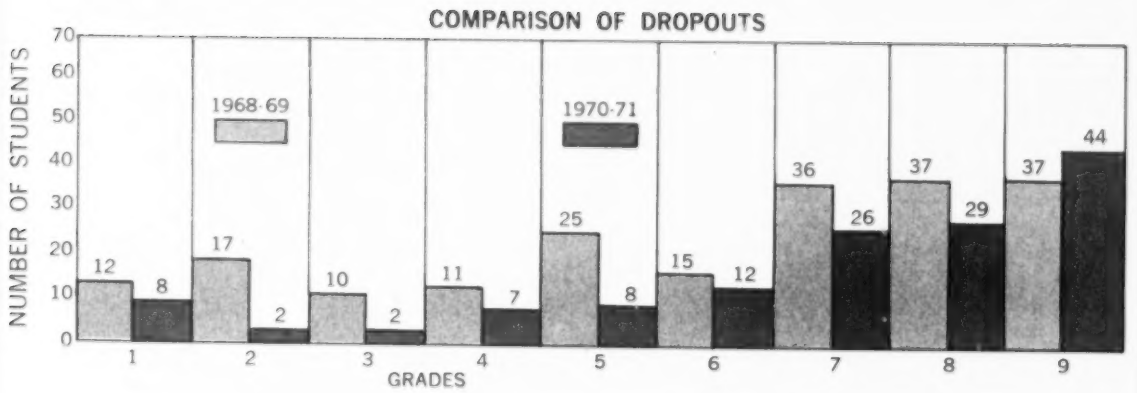
Today, working throughout the county as liaisons between school and the children's homes, the Attendance Counselors attempt to work out problems which may be preventing children from attending school. Restricted to working with only those children eligible for Title I services, between the first and ninth grades, the Attendance Counseling Office nevertheless has been instrumental in alleviating many attendance problems.

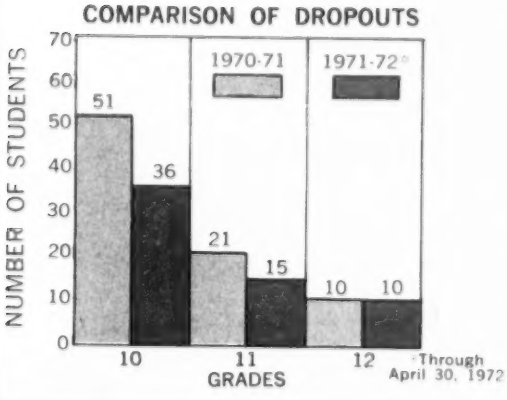
During the last five years Average Daily Attendance (ADA) has risen nearly six percent over that of the 1965-66 school year, the last year Leflore County operated without Title I Funds. This represents an average of 360 children attending school each day who otherwise would have stayed home. In a year's time this means an additional 64,800 school days of attendance.

Where Teacher Units (In Mississippi, through the state minimum program, one teacher's salary is allocated to the district per every twenty-seven children based on the average daily attendance.) are assigned according to average daily attendance, work in the attendance counseling area provides tangible results for Leflore County.

Concentrated work in the area of attendance has enabled the county to increase its Teacher Units 3.5% at a time when enrollment has decreased more than 9%. To a school district operating with limited facilities and overcrowded classrooms these additional teacher units provide a real measure of the program's value.

Leflore County Schools presently employ eight full time counselors and one full time director whose duties have been expanded as their numbers have grown. Each counselor is located in a particular school within the county and serves as part of the staff of that school. As a member of that staff the counselor receives referrals of children who are exhibiting symptoms of social or emotional difficulties which are interfering with their learning, their attendance or their social adjustjustment. Most referrals are made by teachers, principals or other school personnel, since they are in a position to observe closely the behavior of the children and to spot behavior problems before they develop into serious breakdowns.

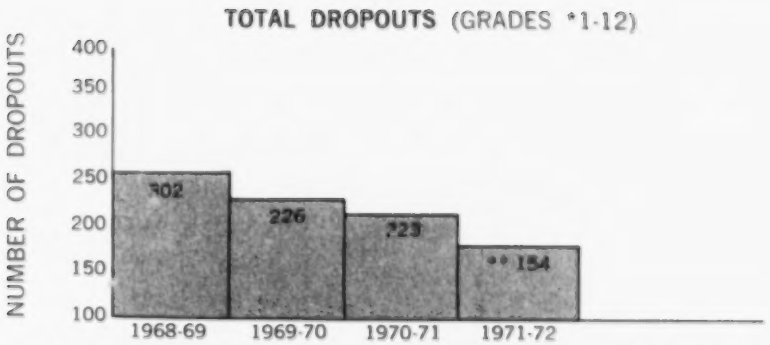




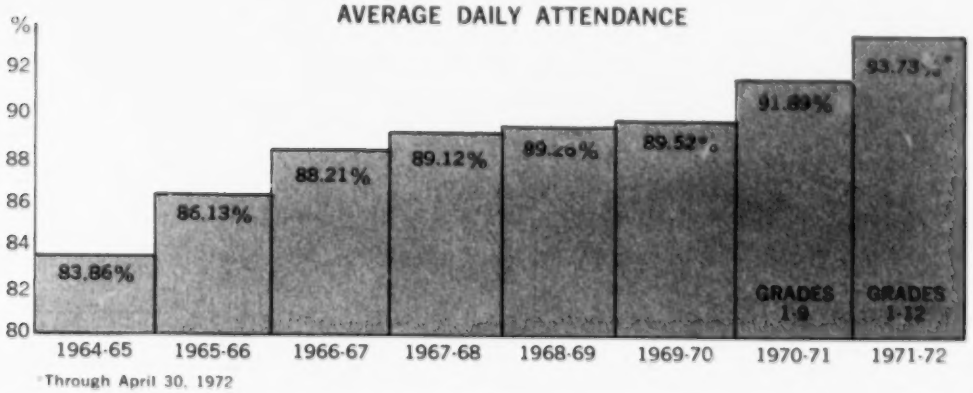
A CHART SHOWING THE EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF PARENTS

with children attending two of the county's schools

Educational Status	Men		Women		Total	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Attended, but did not complete Elem. School	290	82.4	282	68.9	572	75.2
Completed Elementary School	30	8.6	46	11.2	76	10.0
Attended, but did not complete High School	23	6.5	62	15.2	85	11.2
Graduated from High School	6	1.8	10	2.5	16	2.2
Attended, but did not complete college	0	0	3	.7	3	.4
Graduated from college	2	.5	5	1.2	7	.9
Graduate Study	1	.2	1	.3	2	.3
Total	352	100%	409	100%	761	100%



*Attendance Department began working with high school dropouts in 1971-72
**Through April 30, 1972



*Through April 30, 1972

If a child misses two consecutive days an attendance counselor visits the home and discusses with the parent the child's problem. Often missing school is a sign of deeper problems within the child or within the home environment. The presence of an interested third party can sometimes help bring about a better understanding between the child and the parents. The child may have missed school in order to act as a nurse for his younger brother or sisters, and the counselor may help make other arrangements. Often the child misses school because he lacks proper clothing.

One family with several children in the schools seemed to have more attendance problems than most. The counselor after visiting the home many times finally learned from the mother that the children had been taking turns with the clothing. One day the older boy would go to school while his brother stayed home. The next day the younger boy would wear the clothes while the older boy stayed home. Through Title I clothing was provided for the children and their attendance improved markedly.

Sometimes the problem can be traced to a medical disorder. The counselor often refers eligible children to the Title I Program for physicals or corrective appliances such as glasses or hearing aids. In some cases counselors help the Health Services Program arrange needed surgery. An example of this type of service is related by one of the counselors in the program.

"I was working with one family which had 15 children. The grandmother was the head of the household and her two daughters lived with her. All 15 of the children belonged to these two daughters or to a third daughter who had died.

"One of the little boys in the family suffered the loss of a leg, but couldn't use his artificial leg because it hurt so much," the counselor remembers.

The little boy, Larry, had had his leg amputated below the knee due to a birth defect, but the leg had never healed correctly and rubbed against the artificial leg.

"The child was wonderful. We'd say to him, 'Larry suppose we could get you an operation, would you want to go through it?' and the child always took the initiative. We never forced a decision on him."

The Attendance Counseling Department helped arrange a second operation for Larry through the Mississippi Crippled Childrens' Foundation.

Another problem facing the Attendance Counseling Department is the high dropout rate, not only in the high schools, but in the elementary schools. In the early sixties every child entering the first grade in Leflore County had only a 50-50 chance of reaching the third grade. These children withdrew from school at the age of six or seven destined to live out their lives without any hope of improving their condition. The chart on page14 gives an indication as to the seriousness of the problem even today. Starting to work with the drop-outs in 1968, the Attendance Counseling Department has met with possibly its greatest success. In the three school years from 1968 through 1970, the drop-out rate for grades one through six was reduced by more than 50 percent, while the total drop-out rate was reduced by almost 25 percent.

Originally set up to deal only with potential drop-outs in elementary school the program was expanded during the 1971-72 school year to include high school students. During this first year of operation the number of high school drop-outs was reduced by 26 percent, for the first eight months of the school year.

These figures represent only those children who were enrolled and who later quit school. It does not take into account the many children in the county who have never attended school. The attitudes of many parents within the county is noncommittal. In some instances they do not care if their children attend school or not. One family situation within the county points this up vividly.

There were six children in the family ranging from 19 through 8. The two older children, 19 and 14, attended school regularly and were exceptional students. An Attendance Counselor making a home visit in the area in which the family lived

stopped at their house to ask directions. Noticing the children in the yard, he asked the mother why the children weren't in school. The mother explained that she let her children decide whether to go to school or not and that her two oldest decided to go, but her other children "hadn't made up their minds yet"!

The Attendance Counselors are powerless to force parents to send children to school and must rely on persuasion in order to convince the children to attend. Occasionally this can be a pleasant assignment. One day the director of the program received a call from the school concerning a little boy who was seen every day passing by the school with his grandfather and their fishing poles. Switching into a pair of overalls the Director stopped only long enough to pick up a pole and some crickets.

Before the Director left the old man and the boy that afternoon, the child agreed to "try it for awhile". The nine year old child attended for two months without missing a day. Then the family moved in the middle of the night—presumably ending his education.

However, it must be said that the incidence of parents refusing to send their children to school is extremely low. On the contrary, the great majority of parents wish to see their children educated. The fact that most of the parents never graduated from elementary school, however, tends to increase absenteeism. They are unable to see clearly the importance of regular attendance since they never attended regularly. The table on page14 showing the average educational level of parents at two typical schools within the county, graphically points up this problem.

One teacher in a county school relates a story illustrating the extent of some parents interest in what the children are doing.

"One of the students in my class was in jeopardy of failing for the six weeks term, and I wrote a letter to whom I believed to be the student's mother. However, through a mix-up in records the letter was sent to a woman with the same last name but not related to the student."

"Several days later I received a note from the woman explaining that although she had only finished elementary school, she wanted all of her children to graduate from high school. She said that she had three children in school and that all of the children were doing well. The woman ended the letter by saying, "I don't know no James Madison (fictitious name) but if he don't do no better, I stop work and come see why he don't do no good."

To work with these children and their parents requires a person who has the background, the experience, the personality, and the disposition to be comfortable in the homes and social environment of these Delta families. Many people, because of their concepts of social propriety and their prejudices, cannot be comfortable in these homes, and being uncomfortable themselves, they bring no comfort to, nor develop rapport with, people whose social, hygienic, educational, and material concepts differ from their own.

Counselors working with Leflore County children strive to develop concern rather than pity, understanding rather than condemnation, cooperation rather than coercion, and most important, hope rather than despair.

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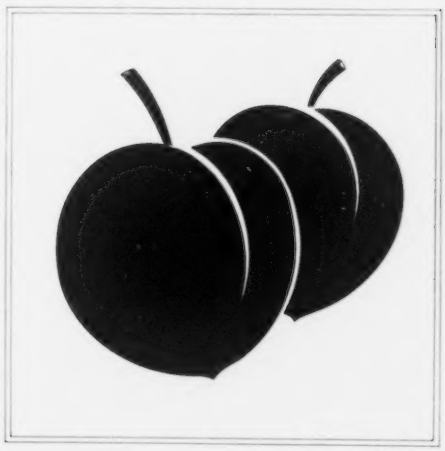

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